

Billion dollar conspiracy industry that thrives on Kennedy's death

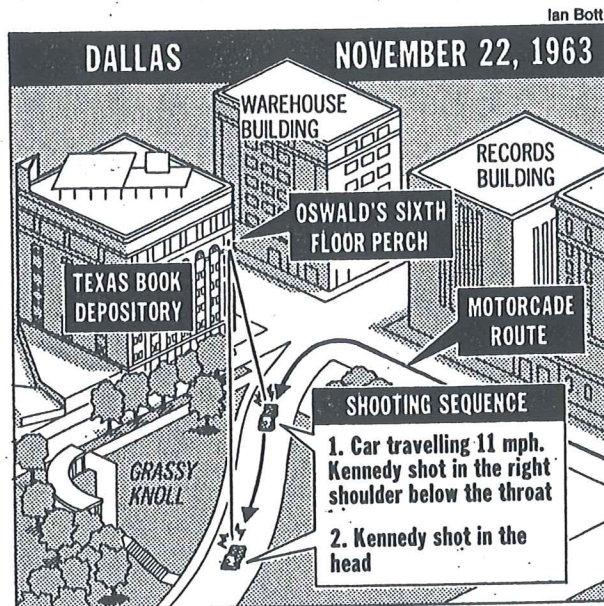
It is enough to excite the most jaded of conspiracy theorists: the president's brain is missing. Among the truckload of records produced for the Warren Commission, set up to investigate the assassination of John F Kennedy, a stainless steel canister containing his brain should have pride of place. In fact, it has disappeared.

For nearly 20 years Kennedy buffs have claimed that a fresh examination of the president's brain would prove that he died not from an attack by a lone assassin but after being hit by at least two different bullets. The knowledge that a secretary of Robert F Kennedy, the president's younger brother, removed the brain from the archive in 1965 only adds to their conviction that there has been a huge cover-up.

The sequence of events after the shots rang out in Dealey Plaza in Dallas on November 22, 1963, were tailor-made for the conspiracy industry. Lee Harvey Oswald, a former marine, Marxist and Soviet sympathiser who had spent time in Moscow, was arrested but shot by Jack Ruby, a Dallas nightclub owner, before he could stand trial. As a result, anyone can chance an opinion on *modus operandi* and motive.

The police maintained that Kennedy had been killed after three bullets were fired by Oswald, who was concealed in the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. Others have argued that more than four bullets were fired by at least two people, and that Oswald was part of a much wider conspiracy of which he himself was a victim.

The Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald had acted alone and was not part of a wider conspiracy did little to dampen debate. Kennedy was raised to the



Official view: is this really how the president was killed?

status of martyred American hero by a nation unwilling to believe that their president could have been gunned down by a single man who dodged the security cordons. The simplest theory was just too prosaic.

Kennedy became a symbol for a principled and optimistic era before the defeat in Vietnam and the cynicism bred by the Watergate scandal. Many of those who were inspired by his presidency wanted to believe that Kennedy had died for his crusades against communism, organised crime and the political and military establishment. There was certainly no shortage of suspects.

Conspiracy theorists argued that Kennedy was killed by the mafia; by Fidel Castro because he had ordered a covert war against Cuba; by renegade CIA agents who thought he was too soft; and by the Soviets because he was too tough. Finally, Oliver Stone, the director of the new film JFK, believed that most of these bodies con-

spired because Kennedy was a threat to everyone.

In an attempt to clear up the mafia allegations in 1976, the House Select Committee on Assassinations produced another truckload of printed records. It concluded that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy" and that the mafia had the "motive, means and opportunity" to kill Kennedy. But the committee failed to name the guilty men.

Two weeks ago, Frank Ragano, a mafia lawyer, said he had delivered a message from Jimmy Hoffa, the Teamsters' boss, to two mafia *capos* to kill the president. "They didn't laugh," said Ragano. "Their looks scared me."

Like many of the apparently plausible witnesses for the conspiracy theorists, Ragano's testimony looks suspicious on close examination. He was not questioned by the house committee as he was considered too insignificant, and

he has decided to come clean only on the publication of his autobiography.

His story is likely to find a ready market. A new generation has become obsessed by the assassination and has given a new lease of life to the conspiracy industry. Jim Lesar, the director of the Assassinations Archives and Research Centre in Washington, says that calls for information have risen five-fold since the release of Stone's film.

Publishers are delighted to supply yet more smoking guns for their readers. On the Trail of the Assassins, a paperback by Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney, on which Stone based his film, tops the New York Times bestseller list. Two others are also soaring up the non-fiction charts. A fourth book, arguing that Kennedy's wounds were altered after his death as part of a cover-up, has sold 75,000 copies in two months.

More than 200 books have been published about the assassination. There will be others. New legislation will be introduced in the House of Representatives to allow the release of all the house committee's papers relating to the investigation. It seems likely, too, that some of the remaining 2% of the Warren Commission documents that have remained sealed may be opened as well.

That could prove to be a stumbling block for the committed researcher. The volume of material is now so great that it is doubtful whether any single author can master the literature to re-examine all the issues.

This is the single greatest strength of the conspiracy theorists. So muddy have the waters become that nobody will ever know the truth of what happened that day in Dallas.

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